

» Masterplanning

The Olympics is the ultimate deadline-driven project, made even harder by its multi-agency nature. Effective planning is central to its delivery. Being a part of the Olympic Games provides companies with worldwide exposure, reinforcing their brand. Failure, though, is about as public as you can get. No pressure for the project managers, then. So, how do you go about planning for the Games?

Organisations delivering the Olympics are doing both 'business as usual' and also accommodating 'business as unusual', since the London Games is a unique event. In this article we present some insights on the preparations by BT and Transport for London (TfL) in the run-up to the London 2012 Games. While TfL is responsible for the transport infrastructure and for getting people to and from the Games safely and on time, BT is the provider for the Games telecommunications. Both transport and telecommunications are mission-critical aspects of the Olympics.

Planning for a major endeavour such as the 2012 Games occurs at multiple levels, involving not only the technical and physical aspects of delivery, but also the organisational process changes needed to support it, together with the social, cultural and people aspects to ensure the desired outcomes. An observation from the planning efforts of BT and TfL is the importance of pre-implementation learning and adaptive leadership. Good planning is not just the scheduling of necessary activities, there's also a need to refine existing knowledge, and to create new context-specific knowledge.

BT had no prior Games experience, so preparations started with a learning phase in which key representatives were sent to experience first-hand the Beijing and Vancouver events, and to attend the extensive lessons-sharing activities organised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). These helped frame the planning approach, though such pre-Games reconnaissance only gets you so far. A good plan must retain the flexibility to adapt to local and evolving circumstances. Hence the wider Games plan deliberately incorporated a suite of 'test events' to evaluate key assumptions, systems and facilities. Lessons from these were then used to refine and further improve preparations for July 2012. For some of the event venues, such as the marathon and beach volleyball, BT only has a few hours to install and fix network issues before going 'live'. This necessitated specific changes to normal operational procedures for such unfamiliar circumstances.

As part of their operations planning, TfL reflected on lessons from previous high profile public events such as the Queen's Golden Jubilee, the 2011 Royal Wedding and the Notting Hill Carnival. One of the key success factors was the need to raise awareness of the impact of the Games on London's roads and transport networks. The key has been to engage stakeholders early in the planning process in order to minimise 'surprises' and ensure travel during the Games is as smooth as possible. Roadshows were organised and novel visualisation tools used to spotlight potential problems during the collaborative planning phase for decision-makers to assess likely scenarios.

At BT, the people side has also been critical for the planning process as the core delivery team will ramp up by several hundred shortly before the Games. New staff must be brought up to speed quickly. An extensive knowledge management system has been developed to enable easy access to key information, including a contact list with notes of individuals' authority and responsibility levels. Individuals with experience of test events will lead the real delivery on those sites so their tacit knowledge is utilised. Realising the importance of personnel development and forward career planning, BT's people-planning process includes post-Games work to avoid key staff worrying about their next role.

“Good planning is not just the scheduling of necessary activities.”

Planning is more than just developing a sequence of tasks. Real projects need front-end learning and continuous adaptation. Planning involves three strategic levels: the technical activity level ('what needs to be done'), the business process level ('how it is to be done') and the individual level ('engaging the right people to do it'). If you consider all of these as part of your project planning, you will be well on the way to being a masterplanner. **[MF]**

For further information please contact the authors at neil.turner@cranfield.ac.uk or liz.lee-kelley@cranfield.ac.uk

